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1998 Commencement Speech - University of North Dakota School of Law

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1998 COMMENCEMENT SPEECH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA SCHOOL OF LAW

THE HONORABLE CLARENCE THOMAS, ASSOCIATE JUSTICE, UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT

JUSTICE THOMAS: Thank you all. Thank you. Thank you all. Thank you. Thank you. Well, I think I should leave while I'm ahead.

You know, it's a real pleasure being here, and I would like to thank President Baker for his kind hospitality and Dean Davis for a most enjoyable few days here. I've had an opportunity to visit with many of the students and it has been fascinating.

I do have one question before I do get started with my brief remarks, and that is, why is this screwdriver up here? Duties as otherwise assigned.

President Baker, Dean Davis, colleagues of the Bench and Bar, members of faculty, family and friends, the class of 1997, and most importantly, today's graduates. This is your day. This is your day to begin a new life and it is with great delight that I join with you, and I'm greatly humbled by the invitation last year and by the invitation again this year.

I was deeply saddened and dismayed by the events beyond this city's and this state's control that occurred here, but I was heartened by the response of the other citizens of this country and of the citizens of this wonderful city and state to events that were beyond their control in its occurrence, but not beyond their control in their response. My heart goes out to you. I am inspired and awed by what you have done and by what you have undergone in the past year. So it is with delight I'm here today, for more than one reason. I always enjoy commencements. I look at commencements as a beginning. It celebrates the end of the student's preparation here and it celebrates the beginning of a life beyond the walls of this university. Twenty-four years ago—two dozen years, I sat where you all sit. I can't remember, for the life of me, who the commencement speaker was. So I add, I have no illusions. I have no illusions that what I say will achieve the permanence of the Gettysburg Address. I will only attempt to emulate and replicate its brevity.

At my graduation, outwardly I thought I knew so much, I had all the answers. I was so certain and so smug. But inwardly, I think I was just relieved to have completed twenty years of formal education, completed it without faltering or perhaps, more accurately, without quitting, because in retrospect, I often faltered, as we all do—I often stumbled.

But as I sat there, I must say that, to my core, there was a swirling combination of frustration, of some disappointments, of some anxiety

about the future, and some anxiety about how I would repay my student loans, how I would feed a young child, where I would live. But there was also a glimmer of hope. I had watched my dreams of returning to Savannah, Georgia, evaporate before my eyes. I watched my heroes diminish and disappear. I had seen my many desperate attempts to get a job in a major law firm, or anywhere for that matter, end in frustration and yield a bitter and fruitless harvest. Indeed, I had only the barren husk of rejection letter after rejection letter. It didn't seem to matter that I had worked as hard as I could, that I had given it my all, door after door seemed to close. But there was a small consolation, that one ray of hope, a young attorney general from Missouri who greeted me with the observation: Clarence, there is plenty of room at the top. Well spoken by a rich person, so I thought. I responded under my breath, much as one of my nephews responds: Yeah, right.

So on my commencement two dozen years ago, on a beautiful May day in New Haven, I sat where you sit with only one job offer in the far off tiny city of Jefferson City, Missouri. Some of my classmates smirked and warned that I had wasted all that money and all that time at Yale Law School to go to Jefferson City, Missouri. Some seemed to look at me with pity, as you would look on someone who is terminally ill. But upon reflection, I got to sit where you sit today, at my commencement, and one small door had partially opened and there was hope. And I had the comfort of knowing that those who smirked could not predict the future, as none of us could and as no one can for you.

I recently told a friend that no biographer could ever peer into our souls or into our hearts, they really didn't know the inner parts of our lives or know how we were like. Yes, they can string together the superficial, conveniently omitting and adding or altering things to suit their purposes, but they can never really know us. They never know those most difficult moments or the most precious moments. They never know how we felt at two o'clock in the morning preparing for an exam, or how we really felt when that rejection letter showed up in our mailbox, or when we finally got a job offer. No. Only we know that.

The biographer can create perceptions of us as saints or sinners, as villains or heroes, but they could never know what it's really like to be us. In large measure I am here with you all today only because I sat where you sit twenty-four years ago, confused, frustrated, but with that sliver of hope as you all have. As I look out on each of you, I wish, as I so often wish with my son, that I could guarantee each of you success, but I can't. I wish I could help find that perfect job and that perfect career, but I can't. I wish I could assure you all happiness. I wish I could assure you productive lives, but I can't. But I do know that you

all are here today beginning afresh with that sliver of hope and with that, each of you has a chance, that chance that I had with that sliver of hope.

Today you are at one of your forks in the road and it always reminds me of the words of Robert Frost, "Two roads diverged in the woods and I, I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference." You're taking one of those roads today and it will make all the difference. But as you travel, I ask you to try to always remember those who helped you this far and remember those who will help you along the way. Those who helped you when you couldn't help yourselves or when you were most in need.

Think about your parents who are always there for you, or a relative. Think of your friends who knew you when things were difficult or who were there to share that rejection or share that acceptance. Think of your teachers, think of your ministers. There is somebody. Thank them, appreciate them, and I urge you, from the bottom of my heart, that you hold onto them. Remember that you didn't get this far on your own and none of us has gotten this far or has gotten as far as we have without the help of someone else and without our faith. Be a hero, not a victim.

Today our wonderful country is awash and suffocating in a cultural atmosphere of victimization. While a victim wallows in self-pitying defeatism, a hero takes on all challenges and challengers. From time to time I am asked who my heroes are, and quite frankly, the longer I live, the more I respect and admire those who lived their lives diligently discharging their daily responsibilities. As a result, I find myself admiring more and more people who lived around me during my childhood, and principal among them were my grandparents. But twenty-four years ago, when I sat where you all are sitting, I looked beyond them, because they were not smart enough or sophisticated enough, they were not lettered.

But those two unlettered people embodied all that is good about this great country. They were honest, hard working, frugal, law-abiding, and deeply religious. They knew what their responsibilities and obligations were and they discharged them without complaint. Thus, in my view, they were heroes. They relished doing what needed to be done and what was required of them. There always seemed to be something for which to be grateful in their household. The roof over our heads, the food on our plates, the clothes on our back. Never was there a gripe that the food was not fine enough, the clothes were not expensive enough, the house was not big enough. They accepted life on its own terms, with all its attendant difficulties and challenges. They refused to complain, and being a victim of circumstance was not among their options. Somehow,

this seemed to me to be what heroes did. But today, as the fabric of our society is saturated with complaint, each of us, each of you, has this grand opportunity to be a hero. But know in advance that it is hard, it is very hard, and you can't be a hero and a victim at the same time. Do what you know must be done, do those things before you now, and do them well.

Some time ago, I visited with a group of young students. I believe they were nine to eleven years of age. One of the students looked at me and looked me in the eyes and asked me: Have you ever felt like giving up? And I need not ask that question in this city. I can still hear her youthful, innocent voice: Have you ever felt like giving up?

I must say, I was stunned. In all the years I had been in Washington, I could not remember having been asked that simple question, but here it was from the mouth of a child: Have you ever felt like giving up? Have you all ever felt like giving up? Well, my answer to her was: Yes, I have felt like giving up hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. Perhaps every day. And so will each of you. There will be those days when you will not want to face the day. There will be those days when you believe you can't take it anymore. There will be those days when it will all seem so hopeless and so pointless. Yes, there will be those days, but that's all just a part of life.

You can either quit or you can continue on as best you can. And in our hearts, we know that quitting is no real option, it is just quitting. I urge you, never quit, ever. No matter how bad things get, no matter how many rejection letters you get, never even think about it. Always get up at least one more time than you're knocked down. Each of you is about to enter the legal profession and by now I am sure you know the critical role of law in our society and the rule of law as it protects us against returning to a state of nature. As lawyers, you must not only begin your careers, you must also assume the responsibility of making this system work. It will be yours in a few short years. I was told, as a student in law school, that you all are the future leaders, and of course, I pooh-poohed that as kind of a self-serving statement by the law school.

So here we are. My classmates or schoolmates are the occupants of the White House, they have been head of the Federal Communications Commission, the Labor Department, and on and on and on. You'll get your turn. You are the future. But before you can do any of this, you must first just try to be heroes to your families, to your friends, and to your neighbors, and even to yourselves. Be true to your faith and to your beliefs, hold onto your hope. Don't let others take your joy. Treat others as you would like to be treated. Help others along the way.

Twenty-four years ago I sat where you sit asking the same questions. Twenty-four years from just this day, you should be able to say honestly, I did my best to do my best. I assure you that somewhere you will be a hero to someone if you can say that. And those of us who are inexorably slipping into the twilight of our mortality are counting on you all to assume the leadership role, because we need heroes too.

God bless each of you and God speed.

